High Touch Priorities In A High Tech World

Techno-Progress

Looking at technological progress in terms of human experience, I used to marvel at how different the world had become for my grandmother from the time she was born in Norway in 1895 to the time she died in California in 1972. To think she started out in a horse and buggy, came to the U.S. on a steamship in 1910, and ended up traveling the world on a jet airplane. During her lifetime, the general population enjoyed growing access to things like indoor plumbing, electricity, automobiles, radio and television.

In my own forty-something years, electronic technology has changed life in profound ways—color television, satellite transmission of TV and phone calls, video and audio recordings, fax machines, and of course, the computer.

Change itself is changing and accelerating at a dizzying pace. During industrial revolution, progress meant being able to do the same things faster and with less effort in farming, household chores, and manufacturing. Today we are able to do more "paperwork" at a faster pace; for example, to store, manipulate and retrieve large amounts of information with computers. The next decade is predicted to bring great things in telecommunications. We can already communicate with people all around the world at a speed and in ways thought to be impossible just ten years ago.

AMTA and Techno-Advances

AMTA history reflects some of the technological progress in the past 50 years. To manage a national association in the 1940s was no small feat. Membership lists and dues accounting were kept in hand written ledgers. The early journal *The Masseur* was mimeographed. Many of the early annual meetings were held in the middle of the country, in places like Kansas City and Chicago, because members either drove automobiles or took the train.

Most communication in those days was done by mail. Some carbon copies (remember carbons?) of letters from the 1950s have been preserved. The time lapses between communications were measured in weeks (no overnight delivery), and things happened at a much slower pace.

Today members can fly to conventions anywhere in the country, and audio-tapes of sessions are available to those who cannot attend. Committees meet via conference call, membership processing and renewals of over 14,000 members are done by computer accurately and efficiently, and our publications reflect up-to-date technology in desktop publishing and distribution. AMTA has advanced with the times.

Techno-Caveats

Like many massage therapists though, I'm a little skeptical of all this supposed progress. Although I'd never want to go back to writing this column with paper and pencil, I've come to reject the premise that high tech devices are the solution to the problems of humanity. A few years back, I chuckled when full body massage machines were introduced into some health clubs with the thought of replacing the labor intensive and relatively expensive massage therapist with system of electronically controlled squeezers and thumpers. Predictably, they failed. As we say "nothing can replace the human touch" in massage therapy—maybe—as you will see later.

Russell Baker has a similar experience as he pondered the results of writing a letter to a friend on a word processor. He observed that "my beautifully printed letter showed me caught in the American comedy about the silliness of progress. Just look at this letter: writing it required several thousand dollars worth of electronic machinery, not to mention a supply of electricity provided by vast corporations whose wiry tentacles stretched across thousands of miles. With all these resources, what emerged? A letter that looked so much like junk mail that my friend would probably toss it away unread." *

Examples like these from modern life abound. Life is being staged for camcorders. E-mail (electronic computer messages) is replacing personal conversation. Cellular phones invade even the privacy of your automobile. TV fiction is confused with real life news resulting in what is being dubbed "infotainment," the blurring of fact and fiction.

Much real human experience is being replaced with images of reality, the newest wrinkle being "virtual reality" in which 3-D electronic images surround you in a lifelike environment which exists only in your mind. Someone has even suggested that one day massage might be simulated using an advanced type virtual reality in which your mind is manipulated to give the feelings of actually being touched. Now that's a sobering thought—virtual reality touch.

To be fair, high tech has both its good and its bad points. While I've banned clients' beepers from the massage room (now cellular phoned), I routinely turn on the answering machine to catch incoming calls while I'm busy. I am writing this article on a laptop computer while I enjoy being outdoors, and I telecommute from California to the AMTA Office in Chicago.

While videos will never replace the experience of being in the actual presence of a great teacher, they do make visual information available as never before. For example, I've only seen

one 16mm film of an actual massage from the 1950s or before, but today many popular teachers have instructional videos of their work.

Computers can make routine tasks like keeping client and accounting records easier, and can even compute your taxes. There are some computer programs which make the study of anatomy and physiology more engaging.

High Touch Priorities

It has been said that high touch is badly needed to balance the high tech world we live in. That may partially account for the resurgence of interest in massage in the past few decades. Massage is a human activity complete with human contact and human dimensions of time and space.

As high touch-nicians, massage therapists often feel uncomfortable and distrustful around high tech—and rightly so. Modern medicine has devalued our work as they have embraced high tech approaches to improving the human condition, and with dubious results in many cases. The public seems to be turning more and more to alternative approaches which often involve touch as a basic component.

How do we stay in touch with our work, and yet reap some of the blessings which high tech has to offer without selling our souls? For starters, we can turn things around and create high touch environments, using only those high tech tools which fit our values and our plans. We can engage in human activity as much as possible to counteract the unreality which results from too much contact with "virtual" realities. We can use appropriate technology for what we want to accomplish like paper and pen for personal letters and the latest computer technology for keeping a large volume of records.

So I embrace the high tech gadgets in my office. I love and appreciate my telephone, answering and fax machine (all in one), and even my computer. I still marvel when my airplane takes off into the sky and deposits me hundreds of miles away to go to a conference or convention. But I love even more when I finally get there and see my AMTA friends and colleagues face-to-face.

After all, that's what AMTA is all about—bringing us together in "association" to meet each other, solve common problems, study together, and have some human fun. The solution to the high touch-high tech dilemma is as it usually is—to create balance and harmony in our lives and keep our priorities straight. We can use high technology as another tool to realize our high touch priorities.

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* Baker, Russell. (13 May 1992) *Ruled by Tools.* The Press Democrat, Santa Rosa, California.